

Sermon Series – “Call to be...”
Sermon #4 – “Share God’s love...”
October 4, 2009
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You may have heard of some of the great theologians of our time: Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Frederick Buechner. But you may not know the great theologian Sylvester McMonkey McBean. In case you don’t know, McBean is a character in the Dr. Seuss story about the Sneetches. McBean shows up with his Star-On Machine, which will turn plain-bellied sneetches into star-bellied sneetches, thus upping their status in the sneetch community. You walked in to the machine, got your star, and then walked out a new person. Ta-da!

McBean may be a little opportunistic, but you could spin that by calling him an “agent of transformation”. It’s not unlike what the church is called to do: bring them in, transform them, then ship them out. Today, we finish our sermon series looking at our mission statement by exploring the meaning behind the last line: “We are called to share God’s love for us through compassionate service to others.” This imperative completes the McBean cycle. We bring them in by welcoming people into a loving and caring church family, we transform them by equipping them with a Christ-centered faith that works in real life, and then we ship them out to share God’s love through compassionate service. Ta-da!

When the Sneetches left the Star-On Machine, they did so with stars on their bellies and noses in the air. But we are called to leave this church very differently, with our eyes open and our hands ready to work. In other words, we are called to go from this place with a purpose, to take what we’ve learned and experienced and share it. This is not a side-effect of being in church; it is the primary purpose for it.

But why? Couldn’t our mission statement be complete without this last line? I know many people who believe the church exists to take care of them. Maybe you feel this way. The church is here so that when I need something or somebody, I have a place to go, like a spiritual ATM that serves up prayers and potlucks. Jesus said he came not to be served but to serve, but I wonder if at times the church doesn’t get that a little backward.

That doesn’t mean we should just ignore each other’s needs. We are a community, a loving and caring church family, and that means we take care of each other. But if our definition of the church ends there, then we have bought into the myth that the church is just one more service organization. Our mission statement, if we follow the thinking all the way through, implies that we welcome and equip so that we can share God’s love with each other and beyond the walls of the church.

The question, “Why do we serve?” is built on the understanding that we DO serve. The role of service in living out our faith is a given in our mission statement and it’s a given in the Bible, as well. James is the best example of this. “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” “Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.” Living out our faith through our actions is not optional. We are called to share God’s love.

But I believe we often times get caught up in serving for the wrong reasons. One author I read recently addressed this by talking about altruistic egoism. Altruistic egoism is the belief that by helping others, we can make ourselves feel better. And there is an element of truth to that. I do feel better about myself when I help someone else. But if that’s my main motivation, I’m engaging in self-service. If I’m serving someone else in order to check something off my mental feel-good list or to pad my spiritual resume, I’m actually doing a disservice.

Let me explain that with an analogy. I've learned the deep theological truth that road construction stinks, but I have come to love the concept of open-road toll plazas. If you have the neat little I-Pass attached to your windshield, you can zoom right through toll plazas without even slowing down, allowing the government to take your money as painlessly as possible. But if for some reason you don't have an I-Pass or you are like a certain minister and leave it at home, when you come to a toll plaza you have to take that little exit and go through the booths, while all the people with I-Passes are zooming by and pointing their fingers at you and laughing.

I wonder if sometimes we don't look at serving others as detours in our lives. We'd much rather keep zooming ahead on our own path, but because we know it's the "Christian" thing to do, we take that little exit from our full-speed schedules and help someone else out, all the while thinking consciously or subconsciously, "I can't wait until I can get back to doing what I want to do." When we do that, the person we are serving is no longer a person in our eyes; they are simply a means to an end, a by-product in our desire to "do the right thing."

So maybe we serve others because of altruistic egoism, because it makes us feel better. Or maybe we serve because it reflects well on us to do so. That doesn't mean we serve to get fame or publicity but it is human nature to want to be appreciated for our efforts. After all, how can our lives make a difference if no one sees us making a difference? But so much of what God calls us to do will not result in a happy ending. We simply will not always benefit from serving someone else. That meal at the soup kitchen may not change a person's life; that dollar in the beggar's cup isn't going to rescue her from poverty. Why make the effort if we're not going to see a return on our investment? Let's face it: serving others has very little upside.

So if we don't get results and we don't get recognition and we don't get to pad our spiritual resume, why serve? "We are called to share God's love for us through compassionate service to others." We serve, our mission statement says, as a response to God's love for us. Through Jesus Christ, God poured out love on us in the most extravagant, lavish way. It's like trying to pour the ocean into a coffee mug or put a tree in a sandwich bag. When you have that much love given to you, you can't help but let it overflow in your life, and one of the ways we do that is to turn that love into action through our service to others. And we do this out of compassion. The word "compassion" literally means "to suffer with." To have pity on someone is to look down on them from a position of power. To have compassion for someone is to look at them as equals, from a position of solidarity and kindness.

What informs and undergirds that service and what keeps it from becoming self-service or acts of altruistic egoism, is our relationship with God. Author Eric Sandras says that many of us are lured into being busy for God, while sacrificing true relationship with Him. A week full of service opportunities will never take the place of an hour spent with God. It is that hour, that time, that relationship that helps us understand the depth and magnitude of God's love for us and why we do everything else we do. It is our time spent with God that inspires our desire to have compassion, to suffer with our fellow humans.

I heard the story of a woman who went to Africa on a mission trip to work with people with AIDS. When she got there she looked around and saw this overwhelming sickness and poverty and hunger and she said, "I just wanted to scream at God. And then I realized God was screaming at me." When we spend time listening to God, we can more clearly hear the call to compassionately serve others.

Having that understanding of God's love for us as a foundation for our serving allows us to serve authentically, even when we don't serve perfectly. On one of our Habitat workdays a few years ago, I was put in charge of placing stakes in the ground so we could rope off some

newly cemented driveways. Obviously, those in charge were able to pick up on my incredible stake-placing gifts. So I set about my task with much diligence, placing the stakes at just the right depth and distance from each other. I mean, it was a work of art! Of course, what didn't realize was that the crew had already poured the concrete for the driveway next door, so that I was leaving footprints in the wet concrete while I was doing my stake-placing for the neighboring driveway. Strangely enough, I haven't been invited back to place more stakes.

God does not call us to serve perfectly; God only calls us to serve. Our service doesn't have to be perfect for God to bless it. If God only used perfect people, nothing would ever get done at this church. We're all a bunch of misfits. We all have weaknesses. We all have faults. We all have failures. But guess what? God still loves us and still wants to use us. God doesn't use perfect people; God only uses faithful people who are committed to sharing God's love with others.

Ultimately, when we choose to serve, when we choose to share God's love, we are doing what God has called us to do. Author David Goetz puts it this way: "Finding our purpose comes not from the results of service but the act of obedience. No matter what the call...inner freedom comes as I pursue truth, justice, and righteousness without needing to be seen as right or needing to see the results I want." In other words we serve because we have been served, and are called to do the same.

We welcome people in. We equip them. And then we send them out, not with stars on their bellies, but with compassion in their hearts. As this church moves into a time of transition, living out this mission statement becomes even more important for this congregation. You don't stop being the church just because a minister leaves. You are still, and always will be, Community Christian Church. Welcome. Equip. Share. That is your mission.